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ABSTRACT

The Ramsey School District (New Jersey) educates approximately 2,200 students, 90 percent of which continue on to a post-high school education. However, in the last few years Melville has noticed a decline in student achievement. Following the New Jersey State Department of Education adoption of Code 6:26, Public Assistance Committees, the district enacted a Pupil Assistance Committee to identify students who are in trouble, and to set up an intervention program for the student to decrease the chance of that student needing special education. The Pupil Assistance Committee has a three-member minimum and must include a principal or staff member who has the authority of the principal, a teacher, and a school staff member. The Pupil Assistance Committee is designed to help students through support and guidance to the teachers instructing them, delivering an intervention service to the student, and actively involving the parent. After a student has been referred to the committee through a teacher referral form, the student is evaluated and discussed, and a Pupil Assistance Plan is devised. Appended are the variables involved in evaluation of the student, the expected result of the variable, and findings. (KDP)

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ATTACKING UNDERACHIEVEMENT
THROUGH
THE PUPIL ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY
SCHOOL PRINCIPALS CONVENTION

FEBRUARY 21, 1994

Dr. Thomas J. Melville
Ramsey High School
Ramsey, New Jersey

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Attacking Underachievement through
the Pupil Assistance Committee

NASSP-New Orleans,La.-February 21, 1994
Thomas J. Melville, Jr., Ed.D.

Good morning. Thank you very much for leaving the warmth of your beds, gobbling down some breakfast, and joining me here this morning. I am Dr. Thomas Melville, your presenter for this session.

My objective today is to share with you some of my efforts in "Attacking Underachievement through the Pupil Assistance Committee." Having attended several conventions over the past few years and having learned some things from listening to other presenters, I have designed this presentation to clearly establish the settings (both school and community) in which I toil, the population with whom I work, the parameters within which I labor, the research that serves as the basis for this effort, and the actual practices that I supervise. I have developed a packet of information that might be of assistance to you should you choose to attempt something similar to what I am doing, and you are welcome to take that with you.

There is nothing here that is terribly original. I seized an opportunity that was provided when the New Jersey State

Department of Education mandated what it has chosen to call Pupil Assistance Committees (PAC) to attempt to reduce the number of underachievers and/or the level of underachievement in the high school in which I work. Much of what I do merely provides a working definition for this malady that deprives some of our youth of their futures and a structure for combatting it. This is not a miracle cure for underachievement; there are no educational miracles.

The Community

I want to take a few minutes to give you some background of the community and school in which I work. It is important to see it in this setting.

(Overhead)

Ramsey, New Jersey, is a suburban community that lies approximately twenty-five miles to the northwest of New York City. In its entirety it covers less than twenty-five square miles, very typical of this northern most area of the state. The great majority of the residences within the community are single family homes on 10,000 to 30,000 sq. ft. lots and are valued from \$180,000 to \$500,000. There are three small apartment complexes that have recently become condominiums. In order to comply with what is called the "Mt. Laurel"

decisions, mandates to provide affordable, low cost housing within each community, Ramsey's municipal leaders have allowed builders to construct low cost housing in one corner of the community. However, they also contributed millions of dollars to Jersey City to be used for renovating apartments to provide low cost housing; this is a legal option open to all communities. There is virtually no land available for additional construction of any kind.

Approximately 95% of the community's 12,000 residents are white. Asians (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese) form the largest minority population followed by Indians, Blacks, and Hispanics. Most of the adult members of the community are college educated and are either professionals or managers. A significant number of them board trains and buses each morning bound for New York City. The community is decidedly upper middle class. Members of all racial and ethnic minorities can be found among the wealthy, the upper middle, the middle, and the lower middle classes. Socioeconomic status, as represented by the size of one's home and the model of one's car, rather than race or religion, is the differential among the members of the community.

(Overhead)

The School

The public schools have long been the pride of the community. There are two primary schools, one school of grades four and five, a middle school housing grades six through eight, and one high school. There are approximately 2200 students in the district. Ramsey students have always done extremely well on nationally normed standardized tests and state High School Proficiency Tests.

Ramsey High School has an enrollment of 720 students in grades nine through twelve. Although that enrollment has dropped steadily over the past ten years, it apparently has reached a low point and will remain fairly constant over the next several years before rising slightly. Each grade has an enrollment of approximately 180 students. Sixty-five of the 720 students are from Saddle River, a very wealthy sending district.

The student population, which clearly reflects the makeup of the community, is predominantly white, Christian, and upper middle class. Traditionally, 90% of the graduating seniors pursue further education: 80% going to four year colleges and 10% going to junior colleges, trade schools, or

secretarial schools. The dropout rate is usually around 1%.

In spite of the aforementioned percentages, however, there is a significant problem with underachievement. A growing number of students, though recognizing the need to attend college, are settling for high school grades that will preclude the opportunity to attend "very competitive" colleges and universities; even larger numbers barely get by in high school and, therefore, never give themselves the opportunity to try college; some, perhaps because they see no need to attend college, see no need to do more than the minimum.

Education is important to community members. Parents expect their children to graduate and go to college; they also expect the schools to provide the best of what is needed for their children to succeed.

The high school curriculum reflects the wants and needs of the community; most courses are college preparatory in nature while a number are considered honors and/or advanced placement courses. There are few options open to the non-college bound students.

There are seventy-six teaching staff members, several non-teaching support personnel, and two administrators. A large majority of the staff members have at least one master's degree and four have their doctorates. Many have been recognized by professional groups for their contributions to education, and most are recognized by the community as being important to the success of Ramsey graduates. It is, however, a "veteran" staff, somewhat reluctant to accept change.

(Overhead)

Pupil Assistance Committees

In July of 1992, the New Jersey State Department of Education adopted New Jersey Administrative Code 6:26, Pupil Assistance Committees. According to this legislation, "'Pupil Assistance Committees' are school-based teams which design and monitor the implementation of strategies for educating non-classified pupils who are referred because they are experiencing difficulties in their classes. Pupil Assistance Committees coordinate and/or deliver intervention and referral services for these pupils and develop an annual Pupil Assistance Committee Report describing the needs and issues identified through referrals to the committee." The intent clearly is to reduce the number of students referred

to Child Study Teams and, therefore, the number of students who are classified for Special Education.

The regulation mandates that there be one Pupil Assistance Committee per building. It also mandates that each Board of Education must fund training programs for new members. The committee is structured so that it has a minimum of three members but no maximum:

1. the building principal or designated regular education staff member with the authority of the principal to implement the recommendations of the committee (This individual also serves as the chairperson.)
2. a regular education teacher
3. a school staff member selected from one of the following professional titles:
 - a) a guidance counselor
 - b) a learning disabilities teacher-consultant
 - c) a school social worker
 - d) a school nurse
 - e) a school psychologist
 - f) a speech-language specialist or correctionist
 - g) a substance awareness coordinator

The Pupil Assistance Committee shall serve referred pupils by:

1. providing support and guidance to classroom teachers
2. coordinating the access to and the delivery of school services for referred pupils
3. planning and providing for appropriate interventions for referred pupils
4. actively involving parents (guardians) in the development and implementation of a Pupil Assistance Plan
5. coordinating the services of community-based social and health provider agencies

I will explain the process that we use and show you the forms that we use to try to guarantee that the process works.

The Underachiever

Clearly the Pupil Assistance Committee is not designed exclusively to deal with the underachiever, and that is not the only purpose that it has in Ramsey. However, I have taken advantage of its existence to use it to attack the growing problem of underachievement.

(Overhead)

Over a period of two years, I conducted a study of high school ninth and tenth graders whom I had identified as

underachievers. In order to do so, I first developed a working definition of an underachiever. "An underachiever is a student who despite at least average aptitude as measured by at least two nationally normed standardized tests (or one test administered twice) and at least average achievement as measured by at least two nationally normed standardized tests (or one test administered twice) achieves at a below average level as judged by classroom teachers for at least two years and as reported on year-end report cards."

I entered the study with several expectations gleaned from research done on underachievers and dropouts.

(See handout.)

I then interviewed all of the students using a thirty question instrument designed to elicit perceptions regarding these five variables: family background, peers, school factors, teacher behavior, and psychological factors.

The findings were somewhat disturbing:

(See handout.)

Now allow me to show you how I have used the Pupil Assistance Committee to confront the underachiever that I have described.

Remember that the Pupil Assistance Committee must include the principal or a designee with the authority to implement the Pupil Assistance Plan, a regular education teacher, and one of the following: a guidance counselor, a learning disabilities teacher/consultant, a school social worker, a school nurse, a school psychologist, a speech-language specialist or speech correctionist, or a substance awareness coordinator. I serve as the principal's designee and chair the committee. I chose a guidance counselor for the committee because I wanted to keep Child Study Team members off the committee, and yet I wanted someone familiar with test data interpretation. I chose a special education teacher, a position not precluded from participation, who would be familiar with a great many classroom interventions. I chose two regular education teachers, a mathematics teacher and a health and physical education teacher who is also a coach. As a committee we have a diverse educational background, diverse professional experiences, and anywhere from twelve to twenty-five years experience.

(Overhead)

Bureaucracies have paperwork, and schools are bureaucracies. The Teacher Referral Form is something that I borrowed from someone else years ago. I send one to each staff member three or four times each year accompanied by a memo which elicits their cooperation in identifying students who are not doing well academically, behaviorally, or socially or who may be involved with drugs or alcohol. It is still the most often used means of referring students in need. I send it to all of the teachers of students identified as underachievers in an effort to gather current information. I also send a request for information to the school nurse and the student's guidance counselor.

I convene the Pupil Assistance Committee approximately once each week. In addition to the feedback provided by the classroom teachers, the guidance counselor, and the nurse, I have searched my discipline records for anecdotes of misbehavior and gotten copies of the student's attendance records for the past several years. I then review the student's permanent record file and have copied middle school and high school report cards including the most recent one, standardized test scores from all schools since grade six to the present, and progress reports. I also make notes from

the brief family history provided in the folder. I often telephone the assistant principal and guidance counselor of the student at the middle school if the student under discussion is a ninth grader and not well known to high school personnel.

(See handout.)

I provide the committee members with copies of the bulk of this material at least twenty-four hours in advance. We have precious little time for discussion so it is important that we all be prepared for the meeting.

Although it is not uncommon for the professional who made the original referral to be present at the meeting, I usually introduce the student's name for discussion and provide discipline and attendance background as well as the reason cited for referral. We depend on the guidance counselor on the committee to interpret the data from standardized test scores. Discussion often centers on the feedback provided by the current teachers. Once we hone in on the problem, we begin to discuss possible interventions. The Pre-Referral Intervention Manual (McCarney & Wunderlich, 1983) provides thousands of ideas, many of which can be modified to meet your specific needs.

At this point we develop the Pupil Assistance Plan. I share our proposed interventions with the classroom teachers either through a memo or through personal contact and with the counselor and parent via a telephone conversation or personal contact. The parent and counselor always receive something in writing as well. At the meeting the committee members propose a period of time to monitor the implementation of the plan and the result, if any. Often several attempts are made to effect changes.

Many of the referrals for underachievers come from me. I monitor progress reports and report cards each time they are issued. Here are some case studies of underachievers with which the Pupil Assistance Committee has dealt this year.

(See handout.)

Clearly the success rate is not very high. However, it seems that whatever success that we have had is worth it. I am not certain that I know why it has worked when it has, but I suspect that it has something to do with the expressions of concern from so many people, the formality and size of the the conferences, the persistence of all involved, and the working relationships with the parents. Here are some statistics as of February 9:

(See handout.)

I would be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you for coming. I have included my name, address, and telephone number for those who would like to chat at some other date.

1. RAMSEY, NEW JERSEY

Population - Approximately, 12,000

Suburb of New York City - 25 miles Northwest

20-25 sq. miles

Single family homes

\$180 - 500,000

Mt. Laurel Commitment

Approx. 95% white

Asians
Indians
Blacks
Hispanics

Largest minority population

Upper Middle Class

College educated

Professionals/Managers

2. The Schools

2300 Students K-12

2 - K-3 schools

1 4/5

1 6-8

1 9 - 12

720 students and steady

65 from Saddle River

Predominantly white, Christian, upper class

90% to further education (80% to 4 yr. colleges)

Dropout rate about 1%

75 teaching staff /2 administrators

NEW JERSEY ADMINISTRATION CODE
TITLE 6
EDUCATION

CHAPTER 26. PUPIL ASSISTANCE COMMITTEES

The purpose of these rules is to set standards and provide guidance for the establishment of school-based teams, called Pupil Assistance Committees, in all New Jersey public schools.

6:26-1.2 Words and phrases defined

"Pupil Assistance Committees" are school based teams which design and monitor the implementation of strategies for educating non-classified pupils who are referred because they are experiencing difficulties in their classes. Pupil Assistance Committees coordinate and/or deliver intervention and referral services for these pupils, and develop an annual Pupil Assistance Committee Report describing the needs and issues identified through referrals to the committee.

"Regular education pupils" means pupils in grades K through 12, who have not been determined to be in need of special education programs and/or related services pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6:28.

6:26-2.2 Committee structure

(a) Pupil Assistance Committees shall be composed of, at a minimum:

1. The building principal or designated regular education staff member with the authority of the principal to implement the recommendations of the committee;
2. A regular education teacher;
3. A school staff member selected from one of the following professional titles:
 - i. A guidance counselor;
 - ii. A learning disabilities teacher-consultant;
 - iii. A school social worker;
 - iv. A school nurse;
 - v. A school psychologist;
 - vi. A speech-language specialist or speech correctionist;
 - vii. A substance awareness coordinator.

- (b) The principal or designated regular education staff member shall serve as chairperson of the Pupil Assistance Committee.
- (c) The Committee shall include the staff member who referred the pupil in need of assistance or who identified the issue which may be adversely affecting pupil performance or behavior in a particular class or in the school.

6:26-2.3 Committee functions

- (a) The Pupil Assistance Committee shall serve referred pupils by:
 - 1. Providing support and guidance to classroom teachers;
 - 2. Coordinating the access to and the delivery of school services for referred pupils;
 - 3. Planning and providing for appropriate interventions for referred pupils;
 - 4. Actively involving parents and guardians in the development and implementation of the Pupil Assistance Plan;
 - 5. Coordinating the services of community-based social and health provider agencies.

6:26-3.2 Pupil Assistance Plans

- (a) The Pupil Assistance Plan shall:
 - 1. Detail the modification(s) in the pupil's education program;
 - 2. List the persons to be involved in the implementation of the plan;
 - 3. Specify the recommendations for assessment and referral to specified school or community-based social and health services;
 - 4. Document that the pupil's parent(s) or guardian(s) were notified that their child was referred to the Pupil Assistance Committee and advised of any changes made in their child's program.
- (b) The Pupil Assistance Plan shall be reviewed by the Committee within eight calendar weeks of the beginning of its implementation.

(c) Parents and guardians shall be:

1. Encouraged to participate in the development of the plan;
2. Given the necessary support to participate in the implementation of the plan;
3. Assisted in finding and utilizing services, and resources needed for family problems affecting the pupil's educational progress.

(d) The district shall implement the recommendation(s) contained in the Pupil Assistance Plan and shall identify.

1. The person(s) responsible for implementing the recommendations contained in the plan;
2. A committee member who will serve as case monitor to review the pupil's progress.

WORKING DEFINITION OF UNDERACHIEVER

"Underachievers are non-classified student who despite at least average intelligence have achieved lower than average grades. They have shown a pattern of decline in report card grades and, therefore, grade point average. Such a decline was indicated on official transcripts in the form of grades that have declined at least one letter in at least two different academic subjects (English, mathematics, science, and social studies) at least twice within the last three to four years and in a computed grade point average that has declined at least 1.5 points on a scale of 4.0 to 0.0."

Example:

	6	7	8	9
English	B	C	C	D
Mathematics	C	B	D	D
Science	B	D	D	D
Social Studies	C	D	D	D
	2.5	1.75	1.25	1.0

Table 1

A Summary of the Variables and Expectations

<u>VARIABLE</u>	<u>EXPECTATION</u>
Family Background	Underachievers have dysfunctional, nonsupportive families.
Gender	Underachievers are predominantly male.
Peers	Underachievers surround themselves with students of similar academic performance.
	Peer pressure has exerted tremendous influence.
	Underachievers place unusual importance on friendship.
School Factors	Underachievers perceive support services in schools lacking.
	Underachievers perceive the school's structure to be alienating.
	Underachievers perceive the school's climate to be alienating.

Teacher Behavior

Underachievers perceive teachers to have low expectations for them.

Teachers can motivate underachievers to perform better.

Apathetic teachers allow underachievers to fail.

Teachers improve the academic performance of underachievers by employing a variety of strategies and activities.

Psychological Factors

Underachievers exhibit low self-esteem.

Underachievers do not feel membership within the school.

Table 5

A Summary of the Variables, Expectations, and Findings

<u>VARIABLE</u>	<u>EXPECTATIONS</u>	<u>FINDINGS</u>
Background	Underachievers have dysfunctional, nonsupportive families.	Eighteen of the students come from intact families. Students overwhelmingly expressed a sense of being supported. However, eight students dealt with instances of internal family conflict. <u>Contradictory.</u>
Gender	Underachievers are predominantly male.	Twenty-one of the twenty-seven students were male. <u>Confirmed.</u>
Peers	Underachievers surround themselves with students of similar academic performance.	Many befriended students who performed better than they. <u>Not confirmed.</u>
	Peer pressure has exerted tremendous influence on underachievers.	Students state their independence from peers on matters of academics. <u>Not confirmed.</u>
	Underachievers place tremendous importance on friendship	Friendship may be the most important thing in their lives, but it does not motivate students to succeed. <u>Confirmed</u> but does not contribute to academic performance.

School Factors

Underachievers
perceive support
services in schools
lacking

Underachievers
found caring
professionals
available in any
situation. Not
confirmed.

Underachievers
perceive the
school's structure
to be alienating.

Underachievers do
not verbalize such
perceptions but do
not seek membership
in the school.
Contradictory

Underachievers
perceive the
school's climate to
be alienating

Underachievers do
not verbalize such
perceptions but do
not seek membership
in the school.
Contradictory.

Teacher
Behavior

Underachievers
perceive teachers to
have low
expectations for
them.

Underachievers
perceive that
teachers have
appropriate
expectations for
academic
performance. Not
confirmed.

Teachers can
motivate
underachievers to
perform better.

Underachievers
perceive teachers
capable of
motivating but do
not necessarily
perform better.
Contradictory.

Apathetic teachers
allow underachievers

Underachievers
perceive many
teachers to be
apathetic enough to
allow failure.
Confirmed.

~~III~~

Teachers improve the academic performance of underachievers by employing a variety of strategies and activities.

Underachievers perceive teachers capable of improving the academic performance of students. However, given the teacher behavior, underachievers did not necessarily improve academically.
Contradictory.

Psychological
Factors

Underachievers exhibit low self-esteem.

All students found one or more positive thing about themselves.
Not confirmed.

Underachievers do not feel membership within the school.

Underachievers do not participate in extra-curricular activities but are neutral or moderately positive about school.
Contradictory.

TEACHERS REFERRAL FORM

THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS REPORT IS CONFIDENTIAL AND WILL NOT BECOME PART OF THE STUDENT'S PERMANENT RECORD. THE FORM HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO FACILITATE YOUR REPORTING OF ACTUAL, OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOR. SUBMIT ALL COMPLETED FORMS TO DR. MELVILLE. PLEASE PROVIDE A COMMENT FOR EACH ITEM CHECKED. YOU MAY ALSO PROVIDE ANECDOTES EVEN IF YOU DO NOT CHECK ANYTHING.

STUDENT'S NAME _____
 DATE: _____ GRADE: _____
 TEACHER'S NAME: _____
 DATE & TIME DUE: _____

PLEASE CHECK BEHAVIORS EXHIBITED BY STUDENT WHICH INDICATE NECESSITY OF REFERRAL:

1. ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:

- Sudden drop in grades and/or achievement levels.
- Gradual lowering of grades and/or achievement levels.
- Academic failure (new).
- Loss of interest in grades or achievement.
- Lack of response to concern expressed by teacher regarding any of the above.
- Lack of preparation for class (pencil, paper, books).
- Not staying on task/always behind.

REASONS GIVEN BY STUDENT FOR ANY OF THE ABOVE:

2. ATTENDANCE:

- More frequent absenteeism.
- Cutting classes.
- Present in classroom but inattentive.
- Attendance at extra-curricular activities sporadic.
- Dropped out of extra-curricular activities.
- Tardy
- On absentee list but in school.
- Asking to leave room often (nurse, counselor, restroom, other)

3. PHYSICAL CONDITION:

- Poor hygiene.
- Neglect of personal appearance.
- Eyes often bloodshot, dull.
- Nervous, agitated, trouble sitting still.
- Odor of alcohol or marijuana.
- Difficulty walking, poor coordination.
- Changes in speech pattern.
- Frequent trips to bathroom.
- Frequent visits to nurse for various minor complaints.
- Burns on hands, clothing.
- More frequent physical injuries, bruises.

4. BEHAVIOR PATTERNS:

- Increase in disciplinary actions.
- Arguing or fighting with peers.
- Arguing with staff.
- Mood swings.
- Sleeping in class.
- Change in peer group (negative).
- Wandering in hallways or school grounds.
- Vandalism.
- Stealing.
- Withdrawal from peers and staff.
- Depression, sudden inappropriate crying.
- Defensive.
- Inappropriate laughter.
- Avoidance of peers.
- Borrowing or lending money.
- Confusion, disorientation.

- Possession of large amounts of money.
- Changes in sexual behavior, blatant.
- Possession of drugs without medical reasons.

5. FAMILY PROBLEMS:

- Reports of parent chemically dependent.
- Reluctant to discuss home situation.
- Runaway.
- Suffered recent loss (moved, divorce, death).
- Troubles in family (financial, emotional, health, separation, etc.)

6. COMMENTS:

Ramsey High School

Ramsey, New Jersey 07446

(201) 327-6800

FAX (201) 818-2656

George R. Rizzo, Ed. D.
Principal

Thomas J. Melville, Ed. D.
Assistant Principal

February 11, 1994

TO: M. Fatuova, School Nurse/Teacher

FROM: Thomas J. Melville

RE: Student Name

The Pupil Assistance Committee is to convene at 11:10 on Wednesday, February 16, 1994, to consider the academic, social, and behavioral performance of the student.

Please use this form to provide me with any pertinent medical information by noon on Monday, February 14, 1994. If you believe it important to share information with the committee in person, please let me know.

Pertinent Information That May Impact on Classroom Performance:

Ramsey High School

Ramsey, New Jersey 07446

(201) 327-6800

FAX (201) 818-2656

George R. Rizzo, Ed. D.
Principal

Thomas J. Melville, Ed. D.
Assistant Principal

February 11, 1994

TO: Guidance Counselor

FROM: Thomas J. Melville

RE: Student Name

The Pupil Assistance Committee is to convene at 11:10 on Wednesday, February 16, 1994, to consider the academic, social, and behavioral performance of the student.

Please use this form to provide me with a brief family history and any pertinent information about this student's previous academic performance.

Return it to me by noon on Monday, February 14, 1994. If you believe it important to share this information with the committee in person, please let me know.

Family History:

Pertinent Information That May Impact on Classroom Performance:

PUPIL ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE

STUDENT: _____ GRADE: _____ D:O:B: _____

COUNSELOR: _____ DATE: _____

PARTICIPANTS: _____

Source of referral: _____

Nature of Concern: _____

BACKGROUND:

Academic potential: _____

Academic performance: _____

Family history: _____

Medical history: _____

Attendance history: _____

Behavior history: _____

PUPIL ASSISTANCE PLAN

STUDENT: _____ **DATE:** _____

PARTICIPANTS: _____

INTERVENTIONS: _____

CASE MONITOR: _____ **DATE OF CHECK-UP:** _____

FINDINGS: _____

RECOMMENDATION: _____

1993-1994

45 students referred to PAC

(21 identified as "underachievers")

3 referred to Child Study Team

3 referred to Core Team

39 active cases

12 have shown improvement in performance or behavior

Possible Interventions

Classroom modifications

Behavior modification

Change of course level

Drop/Add courses

Change teachers

Modify length of school day

Contracts